

Minutes

Amherst Charter Commission meeting of November 14, 2016

Members Present: Andy Churchill, Tom Fricke, Meg Gage, Nick Grabbe, Mandi Jo Hanneke, Julia Rueschemeyer, Irv Rhodes, Diana Stein, Gerry Weiss. Members absent: None.

AGENDA

1. Call to order, approve agenda, approve minutes (5 minutes)
2. Discuss process for researching comparable communities (50 minutes)
3. Public comment (5 minutes)
4. Topics not reasonably anticipated by the Chair 48 hours prior to the meeting
5. Adjourn

The meeting was called to order at 6pm in the Arts Integration Room, Regional Middle School. Approval of minutes was deferred to a later meeting.

Churchill said that as the commission heads into deliberation on the executive and legislative branches and citizen involvement measures, it's an opportunity for members to familiarize themselves with how other comparable communities are structured. He presented a protocol to serve as a model for the kind of information that could be sought. Rueschemeyer suggested an additional question about the role of the executive in the schools. Fricke suggested that instead of asking how a town's government "counters" the power of large institutions, the word "interact" should be substituted.

A list provided by Michael Ward included municipalities with mayors (such as Northampton, Easthampton and Greenfield), municipalities with managers (such as Franklin, Watertown, Randolph, Winthrop), people who have served as both mayors and managers; and the Town Meeting Coordinating Committee's new subcommittee on reform.

Weiss said that the goal of this list was apparently to look at towns with different forms of government, because we know what our government looks like. Grabbe suggested that he look at Dartmouth, which has both representative Town Meeting and a major state university.

Rueschemeyer said the list doesn't capture one aspect that is unique about Amherst: 68 percent of residents over 25 have bachelor's degrees, compared to, for example, 31 percent in Easthampton and 27 percent in Greenfield (state average: 38 percent). She suggested Brookline (79 percent) and Newton (76 percent). Grabbe said that no town is exactly like Amherst, but we can learn from towns that have one or more similarities.

Churchill proposed selecting eight to 10 towns, saying that it would be helpful to know more about how towns organized differently from ours work. He also suggested that the time line for deliberation about executive and legislative components would likely need to be extended.

Rueschemeyer said she felt a research effort would be helpful, and would cause members to think in concrete terms and "force us to analyze how we're arriving at decisions." Fricke wondered how much we can learn in a short time, saying, "We could spend a year doing this." Grabbe said that the commission's first votes will not be final, and subsequent votes can be informed by new information. Gage said the towns investigated by those with more time to spend should be given more weight.

Grabbe asked if members could report back about their research on line, to save time at meetings. The group determined that the answer was yes, as long as back-and-forth discussion did not occur. The commission plans to discuss the research at the Dec. 5 meeting.

Churchill will investigate Northampton and Ithaca, Gage and Rueschemeyer will look at Brookline and Newton, Grabbe will do Greenfield and Burlington, Vt., Weiss will look at Dartmouth, Stein will investigate Natick, Hanneke will contact John Curran (Woburn mayor and Billerica administrator), Rhodes will look at Easthampton, and Fricke will contact Mike Sullivan (Holyoke mayor, South Hadley administrator).

Churchill said the TMCC may be ready to talk to the commission about proposals for improving Town Meeting in mid-December. Grabbe said he wished the TMCC was undertaking such an effort last year or after the charter vote, noting that charter commission members were the ones elected to propose alternatives. Churchill noted that there is a similar, parallel effort in Framingham, where that community's Town Meeting voted to reduce its size at the same time that a charter commission was deliberating structural changes. Hanneke, Rhodes and Rueschemeyer said the TMCC should come talk to the commission.

Stein offered criteria for evaluating the success of other municipalities that we might be comparing to Amherst: bond rating, percentage of the budget that's used for debt payments; percentage of land used by nonprofits; percentage of the budget that comes from property taxes. Grabbe added the percentage of property tax revenue coming from residences. Stein said she would send to members indicators of a successful town government.

The meeting adjourned at 6:55 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted,
Nick Grabbe, clerk

Documents distributed:

- Questions to ask representatives of comparable communities
- Potential comparable towns to look at
- Research process
- Timeline for this work